

# New Understanding of the Road to Korea's Political Development

*Democracy and Indigenous Culture:  
Political Development in the Era of Korean Authoritarianism*  
[民主与本土文化－韩国权威主义时期的政治发展]

by Yin Baoyun [尹保云]  
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The book entitled *Democracy and Indigenous Culture: Political Development in the Era of Korean Authoritarianism*<sup>1</sup> written by Professor Yin Baoyun of Beijing University aroused great interest in the Chinese academic world. “This book must be a great work even when compared with the world’s famous titles,” said Li Wen [李文], a political scientist at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (Yin, 2010, Back cover). In this book, the author systematically researches on Korea’s political development for over half a century after the nation’s liberation from Japanese colonial rule. His analysis of theoretical and actual matters is significantly different from the prevailing opinions; thus sufficiently making the work an original one.

## 1. Correcting the Partiality of Research on “Democratization”

In the Introduction, the author levels criticisms at the viewpoints that

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<sup>1</sup> 尹保云著：《民主与本土文化：韩国威权主义时期的政治发展》，北京，人民出版社，2010年10月出版。

have prevailed since the 1990s regarding research on the “third wave of worldwide democratization movement”. Scholars led by Samuel Huntington, who are involved in research on “democratization,” are generally known to believe that a country’s democratic progress is predicated on a revolutionary “democratization” movement, with the role of “election” emphasized. They regard the past forms of government as “undemocratic.” Yin Baoyun’s *Democracy and Indigenous Culture* discards such viewpoints, which have prevailed for well over 20 years.

Professor Yin points out that “election” is a necessary — but insufficient — condition for democracy. He argues that although democracy is determined by form, form alone is not sufficient for democracy, which must be supported by “a system of forms.” Such system of forms is composed of a set of elements of form such as democratic constitution, legal system, separation of powers, election, competition between parties, freedom of speech and the press, and local government. Election is only one element among them. If democracy is a system supported by several elements of form, political development should not be equated with casting ballots. A country may have an individual form limited to one step of the long process of democratic progress. For example, an election or some other individual form may be temporarily restricted or provisionally suspended. If a basic framework of constitutional government exists, however, political development and democratic progress cannot cease. One-time “democratization” does not make democracy for any country. It is realized only through longstanding efforts and several “sorties.” Of those countries swept away by the “third wave of worldwide democratization movement” in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a number of them made several sorties for democratization, but they can hardly be said to have realized respectable democracy.

With such fresh theoretical perspective, Professor Yin affirms that Korea’s 1987 democratic activism had no “revolutionary” significance, and that it was a continuation of — and a successor to — the previous development. The author develops his argument in this book in

chronological order and provides a new interpretation of each phase of the political history spanning half a century after the Korean War.

According to Professor Yin, the first important step in Korea's political development was to establish a "formal democracy" or a "framework of constitutional government." With the US's assistance, Korea enacted a democratic constitution in 1948 and institutionalized it; the country also implemented in 1952 the presidential direct election system and local government, which enabled a formal system of democracy to be established in the country. This in turn is believed to have laid the foundation for Korea's political development afterward. The elements of democratic form are adjusted in the era of Chang Myeon's Democratic Party during the period 1960-1961 including the restriction of presidential power and expansion of local government. The author, however, does not consider such changes crucial steps toward democracy. He argues that the occurrence of political turbulence in such a short time means the "severance of history or a one-time trial or a one-time collapse" (Yin, 2010, p. 98), not political development or democratic progress.

The major research subject of this book is the political system after the May 16 military coup. The prevailing view of the academe is that this era is "authoritarian"; scholars basically have negative views of the era, particularly of the Revitalizing Reforms system in the 1970s and the era of President Chun Doo-hwan in the 1980s. Note, however, that this book confirms that the political development and democratic progress of this era never ceased, because there remained a basic framework of constitutional government. The author is of the opinion that although presidential powers were expanded and local government was suspended beginning the period of the transfer of power to the civil government in October 1963 until the end of 1972, other elements of democratic form were largely retained along with anti-corruption campaigns and observance of fair elections and transparent policies; thus improving the quality of democracy in this era. Under the "Revitalizing Reforms

system” inaugurated in 1973, the “National Conference for Unification” replaced the presidential direct election system. A special political party named “Revitalizing Reforms Political Association” was established in the National Assembly, tightening control over all socialist-leaning party activities. Such changes are certainly no less important. From a different aspect, however, President Park Chung-hee was still operating within the framework of a constitutional government. At the same time, the author believes that the “Revitalizing Reforms system” can hardly be considered to be lacking in “legitimacy” because it was created by national referendum. In his opinion, the system is simply regarded as a measure for limiting the scope of a democratic form against the special backdrop of the tense state of international affairs prevailing at that time. The era of the Chun Doo-hwan government in the 1980s is seen as a preparatory period for developing into “adequate democracy,” and the democratic form is considered to have restored basically the status quo ante. Although the president is elected not by a direct election system but in a high-pressure environment, the author believes that the election called by a 5,000-strong electoral college does not contravene democratic principles, at least in form.

Through such examinations of the forms of democratic system, the author affirms that Korea neither disrupted the framework of a constitutional government nor suspended political development in the 1970s and 1980s. Although the scope of democracy was limited to some degree, the 1987 “democratization” movement has restored the presidential direct election system, released Kim Dae Jung, and later introduced local government. Still, he believes that the extent of such change in form was not that great. According to him, because of the continuation of the basic framework of a constitutional government, no barrier exists between the authoritarian system and the post-democratization system. Such enabled a very smooth transition to democracy after “democratization” along with a relatively impressive performance.

## 2. Relationship between Democracy and Indigenous Culture

The essential theme of this book is to examine the relationship between democracy and indigenous culture. The author's basic viewpoints are as follows: the developmental process of democracy assumes a consistent form of democracy that remodels the indigenous culture. In the early stage, the indigenous culture may be unable to adapt to the form of democracy, or a violent clash may occur, in the process of which the indigenous culture is gradually transformed to adapt to it.

In Chapter 1 of this book, the author discussed Korea's "indigenous cultural resources," arguing that the traditional culture of the Korean peninsula is the same as that of China's Confucianism-based one. Although it is a civilization governed by a secular code of ethics, it is characterized by an enormous social tension. Note, however, that such tension was unable to promote the development of a political system because it lacked direction. Therefore, it inevitably repeats the vicious circle of restoration-destruction-restoration. The modern democratic system has not been developed only by Europe's traditional cultural elements, either. Instead, it also absorbed the rational elements of the East. For example, it adopted the ruling bureaucratic system and the higher civil service examination of Confucian societies. Once a modern democratic system is formed and established as a secure, full-fledged system, this form of government deviates from the relationship with the traditional elements. Thus, neither the West's traditional culture nor the traditional Confucian culture can sustain the modern democratic system. In both cultures, learning and training are required from the ground up to maintain democracy.

The author addressed in some chapters and sections the context of clash and integration between the postwar Korean indigenous culture and the form of democracy. He believes that, after the introduction of a democratic form of system from 1948 through 1952, the Korean indigenous culture immediately showed its non-adaptability. Utter chaos

ensued, characterized by a confusing array of political parties, activist independents, loose, undisciplined party organizations torn by factional strife, domineering authority, rampant nepotism, etc. The Liberal Party [자유당]'s dictatorship and corruption in the 1950s and the scramble for personal power are believed to have revealed clearly the cultural weaknesses of the political elites. The Democratic Party [민주당], which came to power in the wake of the "April 19 Revolution" of 1960, also did not free itself from the shackles of such cultural weaknesses. The situation can be safely said to be worse than that of the Syngman Rhee regime.

The author argues that, while the cultural weaknesses of the political elites in the 1950s were revealed, those of the social elites were fully exhibited in the era of the Democratic Party from 1960 to 1961. Various types of activist groups consisted mainly of educators and university students who considered themselves to represent democracy and justice; actually, however, the author thinks of them as inferior to the political elites in terms of their ability to adapt to a form of democracy. The political elites had developed a specific habit of negotiation and compromise through several successive governments and grown accustomed to going by the law. In contrast, the social activist elites, lacking experience in the political arena and sticking to their own cultural habits without thinking about negotiation and compromise or without any intention of resorting to law to solve pending problems, associated "democracy" with endless demonstrations and pressure on the government, with the result of democratic activism reaching a point where it became uncontrollable.

The author viewed that the cultural progress in the 1960s Park Chung-hee era stemmed from the establishment of the pragmatic spirit of the nation. This era saw the implementation of the policy of "economic development first" and the "5-year economic development plan" that drew the attention of the politico-social elites and the people away from political awareness to economic development, which is nothing short of a

serious change for a Confucian state that reveres the rationality of value. The realization of progress in political culture from the era of the Revitalizing Reforms system in the 1970s to the 1980s is also believed to have originated with the heightening of the nation's rational spirit. First, party organization was strengthened; the measures taken to exclude independents from running for election facilitated the development of party politics. Second, politicians' sense of accountability and bureaucratic rules were reinforced, and the rationalism of the political system was enhanced through the constant execution of anti-corruption measures. Third, the behavior of social elites and the people's activist groups was bound by law and discipline; their legal awareness and sense of discipline and accountability were heightened. Fourth, the government made a conscious effort to promote the sense of people's democracy, participation, cooperation, etc. Training in the Saemaeul Movement (i.e. New Town Movement) and various kinds of instructions provided for citizens' social organizations are some of these examples. Furthermore, the era's accelerated economic growth, gradually maturing industrialization, expanded middle class, and changes in social structure and people's lifestyles laid the social and material foundation for the development of democracy.

In addition, with regard to a social system and the role of the people, this book offers new analysis. Scholars researching on "democratization" criticize the political "passivity" of the Korean people, seeing the general public (laborers and peasants) as the prop of authoritarianism with no capability to promote democracy. Note, however, that the author argues — based on his analysis of laborers, peasants, and their organization — that the "passivity" of laborers and peasants toward politics is not bad but good. By virtue of their own "passivity," they helped realize periods of political stability and provide the time and space for the cultural adjustment of the political elites and social activist elites. He argues that when a form of democracy is transplanted to a certain social colony, the colony in question immediately

shows non-adaptability, thereby causing a clash due to the backwardness of the indigenous culture. If a broad range of the working-class people become embroiled in political conflicts, such may lead not to the promotion of democracy but to the collapse of the vulnerable form of democratic system. The fact that “democratization” was followed by the phenomena of bureaucratization, corruption, feudalization, paternalism, etc., among Korea’s labor unions and agricultural cooperative organizations suggests that such organizations — once they are swept into the wave of democracy — tend to reveal their cultural weaknesses. Since the organizations themselves require evolutionary changes, such immature organizations are not thought to be able to promote the growth of democracy.

This book — from start to finish — has maintained a consistent idea by examining the clash between the indigenous culture and a form of democracy together with the process of their integration. The book shows that democracy cannot be realized at once, but must undergo an adjustment process for a culture that has its own set of ideas after the framework of a constitutional government has been established. Korea’s successful experience confirms the necessity for politico-cultural changes to be made gradually in every sector of society in the order of political elites, social elites, and finally citizens. Such process is considered appropriate, and the political development of an authoritarian system can be understood in this context.

### **3. Authoritarian Character and Democratic Momentum**

Another striking characteristic of this book is the understanding of the relationship between authoritarianism and political development. The prevailing view is that Korean “authoritarianism” characteristically developed the economy at the expense of politics. Note, however, that this book cites the significance of guaranteeing not only economic growth but also political development.

According to the author's interpretation, authoritarianism differs from "totalitarianism" as well as from traditional forms of government. He sees it as one equipped with insufficient pluralism, a form of government in "transition to adequate democracy." Korean authoritarianism has operated within the framework of a constitutional government at all times. Since the clash between the indigenous culture and a form of democracy perennially intensifies, it is essential to control such clash using certain force. Otherwise, the clash may escalate without limit, causing the framework of a democratic constitutional government to crumble in its entirety. For example, the democratic activism in early 1961 intensified fast enough to degenerate into the movement of the "Meeting of South-North Korean University Students at Panmunjeom," which, had it been left to develop, would obviously have led to the collapse of the system.

This book is another landmark in the analysis of the radical leftist trend. Making specific analyses of the leftist movement in the latter part of the 1940s, the reformist political parties in the 1950s, the left-wing forces in the era of the Democratic Party, the General Federation of Young Students in the 1970s, the radical development of people's movements in the 1980s, etc., this book expressed the viewpoint that, although the capability of radical forces developed as a result of the confrontation with the government, they proved to be potential threats to democracy due to the existence of support for their thought. That is because their thought demanded "greater, substantial democracy," repudiating constitutional democracy based on capitalism. Economic growth accompanied by changes in the social structure, widening gap between the haves and the have-nots, and changes in social status makes social conflicts inevitable, which is likely to worsen if the economy is in bad shape. If society loses control and effective control measures are not taken, unrest will continue to expand and radical trends emerge. There were remarkable similarities between the spring of 1980 and that of 1961, both having the overwhelming impetus to overthrow the existing

systems.

Repudiation of radical activism also leads to the evaluation of democratic activist organizations. Scholars researching on “democratization” universally affirm the democratic activism, acknowledging that civic groups and activist elites have been the driving force behind Korea’s progress toward democracy. The author made another evaluation in several chapters/sections of this book. Chapter 8 in particular is devoted to reviewing civic groups. He acknowledged that democratic activism sometimes promotes democratic progress, but that it also plays a negative role at times. For instance, he argues that the result of immoderate democratic activism in the spring of 1960 and in the spring and summer of 1980 proved to be a hindrance to the progress in democracy. Radical activism frightened the government, provoking it into taking stern measures to suppress it.

It is interesting to note that in the author’s eyes, the authoritarian government also lacks the competence to promote democracy. The political principles of authoritarianism lie in ensuring that political stability is maintained and that the existing basic framework of a constitutional government does not collapse, as well as in guaranteeing the time for cultural integration. According to the author, however, it does not actively expand democracy, even more so when the economy is robust. Generally, the behavior of an authoritarian government, like civic groups (democratic activist organizations), sometimes facilitates democratic progress but hampers it at other times. The Korean government and the anti-government organizations have long been embroiled in mutual distrust. The government represented rationalism and order, whereas the anti-government forces acted for democratic ideals and the turbulent era. Democratic progress can be realized only with the union of both, which takes time.

Therefore, what kind of capability is most crucial to the development of Korean democracy? As a solution, the author presented a democratic form of system in the “conclusion” section of this book. His conclusion

is that Korean governments, democratization activist groups, and grassroots all have undeniably contributed to building Korean democracy. Nonetheless, the main factors are not such capabilities but the democratic form of the system itself, whose role is stable and with clear direction. The democratic form of system is the fruit of modern political civilization, representing a compelling dynamic force for every country. Korea built this form of system between 1948 and 1952. Although it is merely an abstract form with marginal effect in reality, such abstract form has been the standard enshrined in the hearts of Korean people ever since. Since the implementation of the presidential direct election system in 1952, the opposition and the government have not eased up on the debate on the “legitimacy” issue regarding the direct election of the president. In short, the spiritual power of the abstract form of democracy reaches global proportions. Seen from a global scope, it has realistic power as well as spiritual power, representing the role of the US vis-a-vis the western countries. This book describes the important role played by the US in the development of Korean democracy in every step of the way. The author’s conclusions about the “global wave of democracy” in his book are made within this context.

So far, introduction and analysis have been made on the major theoretical aspects and the scope of the book titled *Democracy and Indigenous Culture*. This book’s originality can be said to lie in its overall comprehensiveness. Apart from the details enumerated above, this book makes its own characteristic analyses and conclusions on a number of specific issues. For instance, it touches on President Park Chung-hee’s economic schemes, relationships between the government and the people, scope of development of the Korean political party system, analysis of regionalism of the 1990s, etc. Since this book’s writing is characterized by theoretical examination and historical research being glued together along with a new, high level of theory and perspective, new understanding of historical events can be said to have been provided. Admittedly, various opinions in this book may not win

everyone's sympathy. Still, they may undoubtedly be highly enlightening, sparking off academic debate. As mentioned by the author in other articles, Korea has created the experience of political development for us to learn, including that of economic development.<sup>2</sup> The former experience, eclipsed by the research perspective of "democratization," has not produced adequate awareness of the aggregate result from the academic viewpoints. The great enlightenment offered to us by this book will drive scientific research on the development of Korean politics.

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<sup>2</sup> Yin Baoyun[尹保云] (2010), "Korea's Democratic Development under its Authoritarian Government [韩国威权主义体制下的民主发展]", *Gaigeneican* [改革内参], 46.